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ABSTRACT

Instances of toddlers practicing the art of negotiation while playing with peers in a family day care setting are recounted as part of a child caregiver's search for the sources of her skill in influencing children's verbal behavior. The search led to reflection on experiences in college classes on child development, at work teaching, and at home as a sometimes ineffective parent. The caregiver concludes that the materials read and absorbed, preschool observations, and teaching practice added information to that gained through raising a son suffering from an attentional deficit disorder. (Author/RH)

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# Developing the Art of Negotiation Among Pre-School Children in the Unique Setting of Family Day Care

by

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## SUMMARY

Observing and recording conversations between the children in my family day care home deepens an awareness of their aptitude for negotiation. My search for the source of skill development in this important area leads me back through college classes in child development and teaching experiences to my own sometimes ineffective parenting efforts. Tracing the origin of phrases I use to direct and suggest successful exchanges among our small circle of friends is a more difficult task than I expected. No one source provides an answer.

I conclude that the materials read and digested, pre-school observations and teaching practice added information to that gained through raising a son who suffers from the distress of an attentional deficit disorder. The techniques for negotiation were gathered and assimilated through years of preparation into the practical method I employ in the unique atmosphere of family day care.

"This is my hideout," states Andrew, age 5½, matter of factly as he sprawls comfortably facing a yellow crate tipped conveniently on its side for easy access to the assorted unit blocks within. "This is my hideout," echos 3 year old Tommy, clutching two small cars and flopping resolutely down before a second yellow crate. Both boys begin to arrange their "setups" of secret hiding places for their cars. Brian, age 2½, leaves the housekeeping area where he has set the table with plastic food and dishes. He approaches the block area. Squatting in front of the last crate, he says, "I play here." He looks around, then whines unhappily, "No cars for me?" "Here," says Andrew, handing Brian a car from the basket near his head. Brian frowns. It's bigger than the other cars. He takes it, however, and begins to create his own setup.

These children are practicing the art of negotiation. By verbally claiming their own space and equipment, the two older boys have made arrangements for peaceful side-by-side play that may later lead to shared adventures. The younger child has not yet learned to claim his own supplies and assert himself satisfactorily, but he is beginning to practice the verbalization that helps to expedite negotiative skills. Soon, he may ask, "Can I have a car?" if he sees none available, rather than simply complain. He may even

refuse one handed to him and state the reason for his refusal. "It's too big, I want another one." When that happens, the older boys will have to draw upon their skills to come to an agreeable decision.

Only these three children are in my home this morning. Family day care provides me with any where from one to seven companions at any given hour. Mostly boys, some part-time, some full time, they fill my days with excitement and pleasure while offering me the satisfaction of "being useful." I share with them the joys of childhood...and perhaps they learn from me the intricasies of conversation and negotiation. Of all the many learning opportunities offered in my pre-school type program, none is more important, I believe, than this unsuspected one.

Playing together and developing a degree of camaraderie requires words and mutual consideration. Bargaining, moreover, must be approached from a secure base of equality. Someone must be available to insure that equality or fairness. My position as enabler in this small group of children frees them from the tyranny of power within. They can refer to me for help when their skills are not sufficient to persuade a hearing from a playmate who is intent on his own wants. I may then re-word a request,

making sure the other child hears and responds. Language may not be well enough developed for a 1½ or 2 year old to adequately verbalize his needs. I can provide the words until he is able to speak for himself. If I overstep my bounds, offering unnecessary help, a child may set me straight with a dignified, "I'm speaking to Brian!" "So you are," I reply, "That's great!" Children talking to each other and negotiating their own play is the goal. My most important function is to offer a safe environment for socialization.

I listen, observing their play from the quiet "island" of my rocking chair, marveling at the verbalization among these little friends. Much is imaginative wording of private play in activities where equipment is shared but story lines are individual. But there is also interaction with each other. Building with large, hollow blocks offers a variety of experiences, both individual and group.

"This is mine. This is my own little fort," states the oldest, Andrew, sitting among his half-dozen blocks. The two younger boys arrange and rearrange more of the large cardboard blocks, singing and talking to themselves. Their play becomes rougher, voices louder. Blocks tumble.

Andrew changes his fort to some kind of transportation and calls out, "There are two more seats in back!" "No",

replies Tom. "Yes, there's one right here," assures Andrew. No one responds to his invitation. He resumes his own play for awhile and then tries again. This time one of the younger boys accepts his invitation to ride on his vehicle. After a brief episode with appropriate sound effects, Andrew says, "We're home." "Okay," replies Tom, "Thank You."

"How well they get along," I think to myself. "How did they learn to play together so peaceably?" I check back through the written records I keep on each child. There was Andrew at age 4. On his first day at my house, I noted his willingness to share and his persuasiveness in trading cars with 4 year old Sally. Somewhere he had already learned to negotiate a play situation in a co-operative manner. Three months later, I observed a deterioration of these skills in response to the others' continued possessiveness and unwillingness to share. Resistance met with resistance, and I was not able to help these two verbalize their differences. They simply played together less often.

When Sally left our care, and a boy of kindergarten age joined our small group, Andrew was able to successfully negotiate once more. He was able to deal with the younger children as well. When occasional signs of bossiness crept

into their play, I cautioned Andrew to share equally. Since the younger children were not yet able to express themselves clearly, I helped them claim their rights.

Tommy came to us when only 20 months old. "Perhaps his record will reveal more clearly how verbalization and negotiation develop," I reasoned. After a difficult, though brief, adjustment period, Tommy was observed to be an "easy" child. If a more aggressive child took something from him, Tom never fussed. It didn't seem to matter. When older children said "no" to him and wouldn't let him play with them, he just went on to other pursuits. He was almost too accommodating. "Tell them,'No, I'm playing with that,' Tommy," I'd insist when others asked for or took something he was using. To the older children, I might suggest a way for them to include him in their play.

At 2½, Tommy was able to verbalize well enough to state his needs and join two older boys in their adventures with cars and blocks, dress up and outdoor play. A younger boy took his place within our small, congenial group. Barely 2, he needed many reminders of our basic rules. Brian quickly learned to put away each toy or activity when finished but often forgot to ask for things already in use. "Can I play with that?" and "Can I play too?" were difficult phrases to remember. Tommy, too, needed

to learn new words to deal with inevitable intrusions. "Say 'maybe later,' Tom," I'd tell him when Brian reached roughly for a toy he himself was using. "Ask for things or find another," I'd remind Brian. "Use your words. Talk about it," I'd repeat to all or, "Don't tell me. Talk to each other."

Our rule respecting the right of any child to play alone with an activity of his choice (except when playing with something obviously made for sharing such as unit blocks, Lego sets or housekeeping equipment) creates a safe place from which to face the world. Self-esteem is protected by the ability to say "no" when a child asks to "play too". Being free to choose whether or not to share, eventually they choose more frequently to share the fun. Having to ask another child for a toy or "Can I play?" requires restraint and teaches the value of courtesy in dealing with others. They learn to listen to each other as well as make their own wants understood. Consideration for another's "wants" and feelings begins to develop in a warm and accepting environment. The typical grabbing, clutching "Mine!" of toddler play is overlooked because "once we were like that too." "We can teach Missy (or Brian) to take turns and share. We can teach them not to take things from other people." Their presence seems

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less threatening to the older youngsters, and they themselves become more calm and receptive.

Two more youngsters joined our "family". They were toddlers of 1½. Tom began to practice his negotiative skills in earnest. His year long relationship with Andrew had prepared them both for the give and take of play. After looking to me initially for help with one especially strong and aggressive tot, the two boys learned to use their words as warnings to "Let go! that's mine." Increasingly, they were successful in these attempts. However, I found it necessary at first to physically restrain our youngest from coercive forces, separating him from another, larger child. At last, Eric began to "Listen to Tommy (or Andrew)," or "Take another toy - no grabbing." He began to restrain himself, but it was almost a year before I could record a more peaceable and verbal episode involving himself and Tommy, then 3½.

Together they were manipulating figures in a play family house. "Knock, knock," calls Tom. "Come in, come in!" shrieks Eric. He dings the doorbell, shouting again "Come in." "Let me do it," says Tom. "Shut the door," directs Eric. "I'm going to shut the door," states Tommy. Eric proceeds to toss beds over the roof. "We don't need those, Eric," says Tom patiently. Eric

ignores Tom's efforts at "together" play and roughly shoves against him. Tom gets up and says to no one in particular, "I'm not playing anymore. He grabs." He selects a puzzle and begins to work nearby. After a little time passes, Eric asks Tommy to play with him. "No," replies Tom. "I'll play with you tomorrow." Eric approaches Tom, peeks at the puzzle and shouts, "Hey, I want to play!" "No, you play with the house. I'm playing with the puzzle," answers Tom. Eric returns to the house and begins to pick up the scattered pieces. Tommy remarks, "When you clean up that mess you can play with a puzzle."

An older child reinforces our rules and tries to teach a younger how to play cooperatively. I'm amazed. And then I remember a previous incident, this time reflecting my own teaching in a more direct route.

Tommy and Brian were having a "difference". A screech of protest draws my attention. "He took my cap!" yells Tommy. "Aaaaah," wails Brian in tears. "Whose hat is it?" I inquire. "Mine!" cries Tom. "Well, Tom," I say, "if you didn't want Brian to wear it you should have put it away." And, "Brian," I add sternly, "you should have asked instead of taking it." Not more than five minutes later, Brian is overheard speaking to Tom, "You should have put your cap away if you didn't want me to wear it."

"Well, you should have asked me for it," replied Tom. Clearly, I was a model for words.

Where had I learned the patient reminders and helpful suggestions I used on these young children? Surely I had never used them with my own son as a child. It was my lack of skills in raising him that led me to a nearby junior college for classes in education and early childhood development. Knowledge of normal and not-so-normal development was something about which I was avidly curious.

My son, much wanted and waited for, and deeply loved, had been a difficult child to raise. It wasn't until he was nine years old that we found the reasons for his unreasonable behavior. Impulsivity and lack of control, unpredictableness and non-stop talking (meaningless jabber much of the time) were all signs of an attentional deficit disorder, that responded radically to medication. Even that incredible change, however, enabling our son to successfully concentrate on studies and sort out the bombardment of sounds assaulting him could not insure a peaceful adolescence. It was those years of turmoil and rebellion that turned me at last to education for escape as well as understanding.

Registering for an introductory course in child development, I hoped to become more knowledgeable about the subtle

differences expressed in the term Learning Disabilities. Perhaps I could speak to teachers more effectively if I gained authority in the subject. Instead I was asked to present information on this hidden handicap to my classmates out of my own experience and self-study. There were no "experts" here. Required participation in the college pre-school or day care program enveloped me unexpectedly in the midst of another field of interest, early childhood education.

Normal, loving children responded warmly to my inexperienced efforts. "My son at this age" I reflected "would have created disorder in this room in thirty seconds." As a matter of fact, I had been requested to withdraw him from nursery school at age three because he was "disruptive". Unable to inhibit his anti-social behavior or comprehend the nuances of friendly give and take, his overtures toward other children resulted in frustration and rejection. How differently these children behaved. How easy it was to gain their attention. My heart opened to them and in giving myself to their needs I found relief from intolerable tension at home. This "voluntary" participation steered my course inevitably toward the field of early childhood education and development.

A class assignment sent me to a large day care center to observe a classroom of three year olds. Their mature teacher impressed me with her calm, down-to earth manner and her phrase "Use your words." That was where I became acquainted with one of the practical directives I now find helpful. It seems applicable in many situations...a handy tool to remember.

I was hired as a part-time teacher in a small day care center while continuing my education. Still with much to learn about child development, I drew upon my own experiences as a mother as well as the books from school. Although uncomfortable at first and overwhelmed by expectations of planned activities and schedules, the work experience was thoroughly practical. In this center, individual work/play was encouraged. Children had very little opportunity to play together for long periods. I was too busy overseeing from five to seven or eight children scattered throughout several rooms to observe and note conversations. Nor did it occur to me to do so. The older children of 4½ or 5 played well together with little quarreling. The younger onces played alone. There was no foundation for me there in conversation/negotiation skill development. I never used the phrases I find so helpful now.

"Was it in the books?" I wondered. Was that where I learned the importance of talking to each other...the

necessity of words in mediation and negotiation? Surely the required textbooks covered such a topic. I leafed through my library on child development, checking for chapters dealing with childrens' play. Educational psychology, creative resources for teaching and the stages of cognitive development were all very interesting but seemed to touch not on conversation between children.

Language indeed was mentioned frequently - the acquisition and encouragement of it a favorite subject. Study units prepared for use in pre-school settings stressed specific methods of enhancing verbal skills. Generally they also introduced topics such as self or family and friends or the world around us for discussion. In this way children were expected to gain cognitive skills as well as a sense of self-worth with their verbalization. I supposed these were helpful, but they did not answer the question I had asked myself..."Where did I learn to stress the necessity of talking (and listening) to each other?"

One book on my shelf provided partial answers, however. It was one I had re-discovered during my first year as a family day care provider. As once again I searched the pages of Read and Patterson's, "The Nursery School and Kindergarten", it spilled out such golden nuggets as,



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"Next time tell him what you want," and "Ask him to give you the spoon when he finishes using it." Observing and evaluating were strongly encouraged. Listening to children talk to each other and facilitating agreements over equipment was clearly taught through many recorded episodes in this gem of a guide. The method was there.

Still, the phrases that came so easily now were not all given to me in the pages of that remarkable book. Some were learned in other places. Perhaps my semester of internship in a lab school setting had offered specific tools such as these. Two excellent head teachers had provided me with an immense supply of practical methods for teaching and disciplining groups of children. One especially proved helpful in everyday situations. Speaking in positive words, rather than negative, such as saying, "Walk around the swing," instead of "Don't walk in front of the swing," Or, "You can play over on this side of the sandbox," instead of "Don't play there. That's Jeff's place." Practicing that method was very rewarding. I wished I had known of it when my son was younger. It surely would have supported a self-esteem that was battered from neighborhood and school confrontations. Instead, he suffered from too many and too difficult demands at home from one that was raised in an authoritarian home. No wonder rebellion resulted.

The children at the lab school had adequate time set aside for free play but were divided into age groups of 3's and 4's. They spent only two or three afternoons a week in that setting, limiting opportunities for the development of friendships. It was not at all similar to the uniqueness of family day care. Time together seems to be an important ingredient in the building of negotiative skills.

One more source remained to explore in my search for the phrases I was discovering to be so useful. Magazines. Again, I leafed through pages and scanned the tables of content. Very little pointed to conversation or negotiation. Many articles proved useful to me in my work, but my search for conversation/negotiation skill teaching remained fruitless.

"It can't be new," I reasoned, "and I didn't think of these things my myself." At any rate, the children in my care had learned to "use words" and "talk to each other" successfully. Now that I became aware of these aids to socialization, I could more adequately encourage their use through the stages of language development. My earlier inability to understand and meet my son's needs for patient instruction in the skills of negotiation with his peers produced severe consequences. At last some-

thing positive is growing from the pain of those turbulent years. Our relationship has adjusted into a satisfying sense of rightness, and I am free to teach other children the art of negotiation in the unique setting of family day care. The components of necessary skills have been gathered from diverse sources and assimilated through trial and error into a method I can comfortably use in my own home.

"Use your words," I'll instruct. "Don't tell me about it. Talk to each other. Work it out together." The newest toddler will hear, "Ask Tommy if you can play with that," or "Tell him 'no' if you don't want to share." Knowing already that his speech is limited, I will speak for him, modeling the friendly approach that wins success. The other children will patiently affirm my teachings and welcome him into their fellowship.

The circle that began with my son grows larger. Where once there was rejection, a living circle of love now reaches out to each other with acceptance and help. When it expands one day soon to include my own grandchild, my sense of satisfaction will be complete.

## REFERENCE

Read/Patterson, 1980, The Nursery School and Kindergarten, Seventh Edition; Holt, Rinehart and Winston